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ABSTRACT

After an introduction to the use of the whole language approach in adult literacy instruction, this paper describes some techniques or activities used in two adult literacy programs in Vancouver with participants who speak English as a first and as a second language. The Municipal Workplace Literacy Program, operated by the City of Vancouver (British Columbia), is a voluntary and confidential 80-hour program that offers one-half paid release time and serves mostly non-professionals. The Little Mountain Neighbourhood House/Vancouver School Board Tutor Training and Practicum Centre program serves recent immigrants, mostly of Chinese origin but also Indian, Central and South American, Polish, and Russian. Approximately half of the participants have university degrees from their countries of origin; the other half have had little or no formal schooling. Both programs use many whole language techniques, including shared reading, transcribed text, sustained silent reading, language experience, and interactive writing for adult literacy learners. Two additional strategies are used as well: an affirmation strategy that has come to be called "Affirmation: The Immigrant's Two Lives and the Cycle of Grief," and a strategy borrowed from the work of novelist Milan Kundera that involves the use of an existential code that inspires and guides the writing. The affirmation strategy uses simple drawings, gestures, translation, and some English to describe the learner's work, relationships, language and cultural connections, education, interests, etc. During the first 20 months of the program, only 2 of the 120 participants dropped out. Contains 17 references. (LB) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACHES IN ADULT LITERACY

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Today, if you are fortunate enough to visit one of the many adult language and literacy programs using the whole language approach, you are likely to see an educational program where authentic reading and writing form the core of instruction. In programs using this approach, adults become part of a community of learners engaged in reading, talking, and writing about their experiences, their concerns, their aspirations, and their memories: about their families and communities, their hopes and fears (Rigg 1990). They engage in authentic literacy events where they may celebrate their achievements as well as confront those things which are preventing them from reaching their goals.

Both oral and written language are integral to this process and the classroom environment iw rich with print, offering a variety of reading materials and writing opportunities for participants. Newspapers, magazines, fiction, poetry, school texts, children's reading books, manuals, or job-related materials might all be available; additionally, writings of other adults in the program may be shared in draft form, in a collaborative writing-revising-editing process, or be made available in published newsletters, magazines, or collections of stories.

Adults in these programs write for a variety of authentic purposes. They may record incidents from their lives or stories they were told as children to share with their families and friends; they may write letters to their children's teachers or to social service agencies to ask for information; they may create expressive poems; or they may write entries into journals or logs, recording their thoughts or responding to what they have read. Individual participants may be writing several pieces at one time, drafting some and discussing or editing others.

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This description of an adult literacy program may be surprising to those more familiar with traditional programs using phonics or whole word approaches to literacy instruction. In these more traditional programs, adults may spend a great deal of time decoding written language, focusing on sound-symbol correspondences – or as one learner put it, on "how to pronounce the big words" (Crandall 1981) – or upon reading or copying lists of unrelated words before attempting to read sentences, paragraphs, or whole texts which are meaningful or functional. This *bottom up* approach to literacy instruction proceeds from small

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bits of language to larger, more meaningful chunks in an incremental, linear fashion. Not much meaningful reading or writing is likely to be done, at least in the early stages, except for decoding and copying the letters of the alphabet or reading and writing lists of words or simple form language (one's name and address, phone number, etc.)

Whole language approaches emphasize the importance of using whole texts for literacy and of making reading and writing meaningful and purposeful activities from the outset, with attention focused on vocabulary, spelling, and other formal or mechanical considerations when they became relevant. As Kenneth Goodman (1986) puts it, in whole language classrooms, "The focus is on meaning and not on language itself." Whole language literacy instruction proceeds from the *top down*: from meaningful, larger texts to smaller language units. Phonics is not eliminated; instead, the relationships between sound and symbols are introduced when a learner encounters an unfamiliar word or is confused about words with similar spellings or when sentence structure affects the meaning of what one has written or read. As Frank Smith (1988) has reminded us, it isn't phonics which makes you good at reading; it's reading which makes you good at phonics.

How is it that some programs begin with actual reading and writing, while others spend time on fundamentals before moving to fuller texts? Why is the focus in some programs more on the written product, and in others, on the reading and writing process? One might expect that adult literacy instructors would naturally use meaning-based approaches and engage adults in meaningful reading and writing, given the degree to which *andragogy* (Knowles 1970) has replaced *pedagogy* in adult education theory and practice. *Andragogy,* or adult learning theory, reminds us that adults are not blank slates; that they bring complex social, familial, and community relationships to their learning; and that they are likely to have competing responsibilities which will result in their participating in education only if they can see some personal reward in the process. If a program is to build on what an adult already knows and brings to the class, a whole language approach may be more appropriate than an instructional approach which requires adults to begin again, from the *bottom up.*

The roots of the whole language approach are in early childhood language and literacy instruction, where increasingly, researchers and teachers have noticed that even the so-called scribbles on a child's page have meaning to that child and are signs of *emergent literacy* which, if supported and encouraged in class, will lead to more complex writing and reading. Whole language takes cognizance of the rich literacy environment in which students live: one where signs, labels, advertisements, notices, calendars, cards, and telephone books are present; and newspapers, magazines, and story books may also be available. Thus, children enter school with a great deal of knowledge about their language – knowledge which they bring to initial literacy development – if they are given the opportunity to use it, talk about it, write about it, and read about it. For whole language learners, there is less obvious division between learning to read and reading to

learn; there is also less division between oral and written language development. Instead, reading is part of an interactive process of meaning-construction by which learners become familiar with the written conventions of their language while they are also speaking it.

If children bring so much to their literacy instruction, it is clear that adults bring even more: more varied experiences, greater knowledge of both their world and their language; and wider understanding of the purposes and functions of literacy and of the barriers that inadequate literacy produces in their lives.

For adults, whole language can form the basis for any type of literacy program, whether the focus is on initial literacy, on family literacy, or on workplace literacy or worker education. It can also be used in programs for first or second language learners, learning together or in separate programs.

A whole language literacy program is especially appropriate for second language learners, whether they are literate in another language or not. Acquiring a second language involves acquiring a whole new set of meaningful relationships between words or sentences and objects or experiences. It is not enough to have adults sound out d-o-g as *dog* if they do not know that those sounds refer to a four-legged domestic animal or an animal known as *perro* or *chien* in their first language. Sounding out unrelated lists of words may not be a very meaningful or functional activity for any adult learner, but when these words lack any meaningful referent and appear to be nonsense, the process is even more questionable and can lead to doubt about the relevance of this learning activity to one's life. Moreover, the unpredictability of much English spelling (witness the number of ways in which the sound /i/ can be represented – see, receive, sea, believe, me, etc. – makes the use of a phonics approach even more problematic. Whole language provides a meaningful and meaning-based approach by which the sound-symbol correspondences will be acquired, but only as they occur naturally in the texts which learners read or write.

These naturally occurring contexts may result in a number of different techniques or activities used in a whole language classroom, including language experience stories, dialogue journals, process-based writing and publishing, sustained silent reading, and shared reading. Each of these involves meaningful, purposeful use of written and oral language.

Language experience stories are based on the premise that people can read what they can write and they can write (or have written for them) what they can say. In language experience stories, learners (and instructors) share an experience (a film, a field trip, a speaker, a problem, a letter, or even a meal) and write about it together. Initially, the learner(s) dictate the story or message to someone (usually the instructor) who writes it down, so that it can be re-read, revised, and eventually copied, added to, and otherwise used in a variety of language-learning and language-meaning activities. The language experience approach uses the learner's own language and experiences as the basis of both reading and writing, creating not only a meaningful text, but also ensuring that the text is at the learner's

language and literacy level. Language experience stories can be used in group classes or individual tutorial sessions, providing a meaningful basis for both literacy and language development (Dixon & Nessel 1983; Lee & Van Allen 1963). While the language experience approach pre-dates whole language, it is naturally incorporated into a whole language approach.

With dialogue journals (Peyton 1986; Peyton & Staton 1991), learners engage in a written conversation, often with the instructor, but also with other learners. They write about topics that are important to them – describing, asking questions, or even complaining about their lives – writing as much or as little as they believe necessary. The instructor responds to the entry, focusing on the meaning of the passage (not on the grammar, spelling, or mechanics), asking real questions and contributing to the written conversation. In the process of responding, the instructor provides rich models for the learner to read and then use. Over time, entries in the dialogue journal become longer, with more complex sentence structure and greater variety in vocabulary, in a process of writing acquisition which parallels oral language acquisition, where the focus has been on meaningful exchange of ideas rather than production of model sentences or paragraphs.

Another type of writing often serves as the basic activity in whole language programs: process-based writing and publishing. Participants are encouraged to explore their ideas and write a number of drafts before they focus attention on such editing details as spelling, punctuation, or sentence structure, surface level concerns which become important when the piece of writing will be published and reach an audience. Writing in these programs is taken seriously and adults spend time finding a voice and developing stories, poems, or other pieces which can be published and shared with others locally in their learning community or even more widely through a journal which is more broadly distributed. (See Gillespie 1989; Peyton 1990.)

These published stories become part of a resource library, joining other published materials which are made available for participants to read. Many whole language programs set aside time so that learners may read silently to themselves, or in shared reading experiences: for example, listening to someone reading a children's story or collaboratively working out what a particular union or workplace announcement means for them.

This, then, is an introduction to the use of the whole language approach in adult literacy instruction. What follows is a description of some techniques or activities used in two adult literacy programs in Vancouver with participants who speak English as a first and as a second language: the Municipal Workplace Language Program, operated by the City of Vancouver, and the Little Mountain Neighbourhood House/Vancouver School Board Tutor Training and Practicum Centre program.

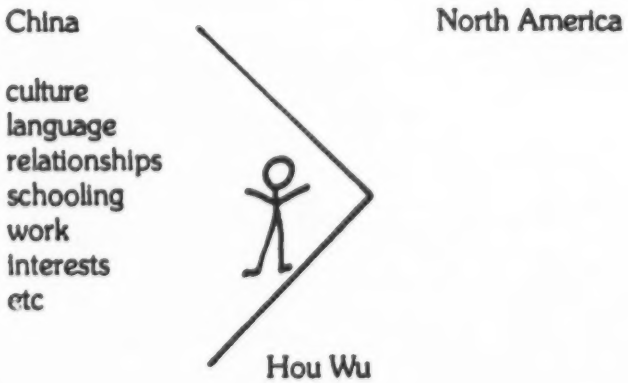
The Municipal Workplace Literacy Program, which has been in existence for 20 months, is a voluntary and confidential 80-hour program which offers one-

half paid release time and serves mostly non-professionals, although any of the 9000 city workers is eligible to attend. The Little Mountain Neighbourhood House/Vancouver School Board Tutor Training and Practicum Centre program serves recent immigrants, mostly of Chinese origin (Hong Kong, People's Republic of China, and Taiwan), as well as those of Indian, Central and South American, Polish, and Russian origins. Approximately half of the participants have university degrees from their country of origin; the other half have had little or no formal schooling. Both programs use many of the whole language techniques described above: shared reading, transcribed text, sustained silent reading, language experience, and interactive writing for adult literacy learners. Learner writing is fundamental to the program and is viewed within the larger context of literature. The programs share many similarities with the Invergarry Adult Learning Centre, also in Vancouver, which has become internationally known through its magazine of learner's writings, *Voices*. In fact, many learners from adult language and literacy programs around the world contribute to the journal. (See Rigg 1990 for a detailed description of the program at Invergarry.)

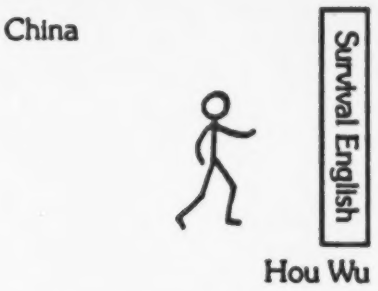
There are two additional strategies used by the Municipal Workplace and Little Mountain programs which have proven to be very effective with newly-arrived immigrants and refugees. One of these, for want of a better descriptor, has come to be called *Affirmations: The Immigrant's Two Lives and the Cycle of Grief!* The other is borrowed from the work of novelist Milan Kundera and involves the use of an *existential code* which inspires and guides the writing.

The *affirmation strategy* usually proceeds in the following way:

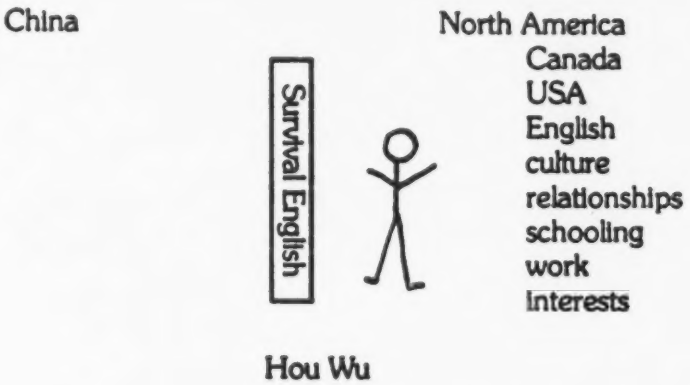
Using simple drawings, gestures, translation, and a little English, the learner and the instructor collaboratively develop a text outline that speaks to the richness and fullness of the learner's life in his or her country of origin. This text describes the learner's work, relationships, language/cultural connections, education, interests, and so on. Graphically, it looks about like this:



The second stage of development in this text looks at how the learner's life has shrunk to a narrow, marginal band – very vertical and very circumscribed – and for the most part, holding the learner to some survival English.

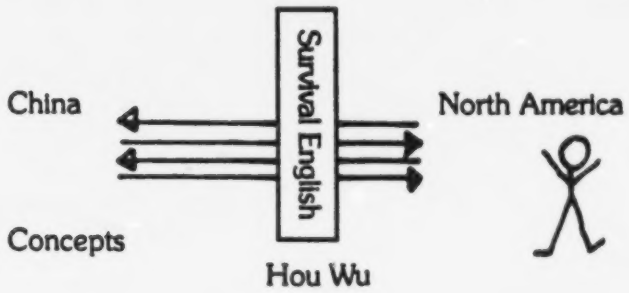


The third stage of text development offers a vision of what the recent immigrant's life can become:



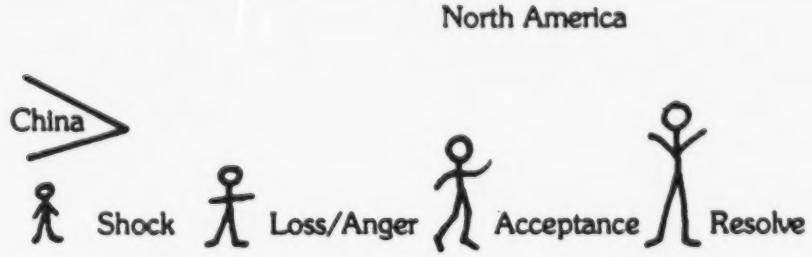
The fourth affirmation shows the separation between body and mind. The picture-text illustrates the ways that many immigrants leave their minds (in other words, the language of ideas) in their homeland, bringing only their bodies to their new country.

The next picture-text shows the learner returning time after time to his or her country of origin to retrieve information or language upon which to build English.



Along with each picture outline-text, the instructor, working in consultation with the learner, develops a strong, personal text which validates the learner's journey from home country to new; in other words, a simple English narrative text that can be used as a first reader.

An important third text is also created within this process: the text that speaks to the learner about the cycle of grief an immigrant undergoes when leaving his or her country of origin. This text serves to bridge the chasm between the leaner's old world and his or her new reality. It can be stated very simply: In moving from China to North America, the learner (Hon Wu) has moved from the Familiar, through Shock, then Loss and Anger, to Acceptance and Resolve.



The following collaborative and transcribed personal texts, from Hou Wu, articulate this progression in a more expressive way.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

I am Hou Wu, a citizen of The
People's Republic of China.
I speak Chinese and write Mandarin.
I am a nurse.
I like music.

I AM IN CANADA NOW

Everything is new.
I have left my family.
I have left my friends.
I have left my culture.
I am sad.
I am unhappy.
Everyone needs someone to
talk with.
I would like to speak more
English, and, also, continue
using Chinese.

I HAVE SUFFERED A GREAT LOSS

But I am strong.
I was not always a nurse.
I worked hard to become a good
nurse.
I will need to work as hard
to speak and write English.

I ACCEPT THAT I AM HERE IN CANADA

And, I accept my new life.
I am still lonely. I can't wait for
anyone to give me English.
It is like eating.
I must eat of English a little
each day.
Today is the first day of my new
resolve, my strong commitment
and my determination to use
English in the same way I use
and, always will, Chinese.
Life goes on.
It is my choice.
Do I bring my body to Canada,
only to leave my mind in
China?
If I do so, I will not live a full
and complete life.

> more I become the person who is the real me. Even though I'm a second language learner, I'm really proud of myself because I can describe all of my feelings in English. The priest, who usually takes my confession, doesn't know how to speak my language and I didn't know how to speak his language when I first met him. However, with my self-confidence and with my will power, I will be able to talk with him, little by little, as he teaches me through my mistakes.

How different is the learner's vision of language in moving from "I only wanted ... " to "find myself" and "I can describe my feelings." The first message dramatically underscores the notion of language as a tool and a common existential code of limited English proficient learners, whereas the other two passages, in equally dramatic fashion, express the writer's realization and vision of language, not as tool, but as the means to discovering and knowing the self.

These two techniques, combined with the other authentic reading and writing activities in the programs, create adult literacy programs which are meaningful, relevant, and functional to the participants' lives. Not surprisingly, since the beginning of the program 20 months ago, only two of the 120 participants have dropped out.

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